'Certain Beliefs of the Bella Coola Indians Concerning Animals II

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tinued his swim.

As the noise grew louder the boy on the bank cried out: "Come back! Come back! There is something bad there that we do not understand."

His friend in the water again answered: "Oh! There is nothing wrong."

The noise increased, and sticks and stones were drawn from the bank and flew out towards the centre of the lake. The suction eventually grew so great that the youth on land was forced to clutch a tree-trunk with his arms, while his legs waved out towards the water like pennants, fluttering in a strong wind. The strain on his arms was so terrific that he was almost forced to relinquish his grip before the suction subsided. When he looked at the lake the swimmer had vanished.

The survivor returned to the village and reported what had happened. No one believed his story; instead, he was made a prisoner, accused of having killed the chief's son. For a week the people questioned him daily without being able to shake his story; then they decided to kill him. The youth, learning of this, concluded that he might as well face an unknown peril as the certain death to be meted out by his fellows, so he asked them to allow him to go swimming in the lake to prove that there was something dangerous there. They granted the request, as well as a further one, that he be sewn up in a tight-fitting suit of caribou skin, and armed with a knife.

"Now come with me," he said to his fellow-villagers when he was ready.

They waited on the shore while he swam out into the lake, singing. Presently the crackling and sucking sound was heard, and soon the spectators were forced to clutch tree-trunks to keep themselves from being drawn into the water, while their legs were blown out horizontally as the youth's had been on the previous occasion. When the wind subsided

the swimmer had vanished.

He had been sucked into the stomach of a skämtsk without being killed. Groping around, he presently found the corpse of the chief's son from which he cut the belt and put it on, as proof of his veracity should he succeed in returning home. Then he made his way to the neck of the monster through which he cut a hole. As the water rushed in he dived out. The surface was so far up that he was nearly drowned in reaching it; but, with his last gasp, his head rose above the water. He swam ashore without difficulty, and the evidence of the belt confirmed his story. The carcass of the skämtsk floated to the surface not long afterwards.

Although the forests of British Columbia abound with supernatural animals of enormous power, the attitude of the Bella Coola hunter who penetrates into lonely places is not one of constant fear. It is true that he may meet danger at any turn, but danger is part and parcel of human life, and he is by no means defenceless. He dreads the powers possessed by creatures of another plane, but they for their part dread certain human objects. Clothing which has been worn for so long that it has become steeped with the emanations of its human wearer belongs to a sphere of existence differing from that of supernatural animals and dangerous to them. Consequently, if worn clothing be thrown on a fire it repels unpleasant visitors. Other powerful protections are the plant potsqɬ and smoked salmon roe. A wise hunter always carries these and if he sees a dangerous creature such as a snɑɳɛq, he chews the two together and spits them towards the peril. Why potsqɬ, a plant, should be so effective, is a matter of wonder to the Bella Coola themselves, for as a rule it is the human essence attached to objects which gives them their strength over the supernatural.

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The mythical monsters already described arenot the only supernatural animals known to the Bella Coola. They believe that in the beginning of time the creator made men and beasts at the same time and in the same place, giving the former the greater share of power, but not exiling the latter to a different world. In those early days, the semi-supernatural forefathers of the Bella Coola had the ability to talk with animals and birds. The men of to-day, never doubting the accuracy of their myths, and realising that such intercourse is not now possible, assume that they have degenerated from the golden age of their first ancestors. On the other hand, they see no reason to believe that beasts have undergone a similar change, so it is tacitly taken for granted that they have continued in the xx supernatural, or semi-supernatural state in which they were created. It is true that man is stronger than most animals, but that does not affect the attitude with which the latter are regarded, for supernatural and powerful are not synonymous terms. It was decreed that they should serve as food for mankind, and they have since done so, but the Bella Coola do not consider themselves undisputed lords of creation. They fear snusx, xxxxxx snɑɔɑq and other creatures of great power, but they know how to avoid them; similarly, deer and mountain goats fear men, but they are not entirely defenceless, because their speed and agility give them advantages corresponding to those xxxxxxxxxxxxxx of men in combat with beasts stronger than themselves. All living creatures use the xx weapons with which they are equipped. For example, when a mountain goat eludes a hunter by scaling a precipice too steep for its pursuer, the latter considers it has escaped through supernatural climbing ability; whereas the goat has merely used the power granted by the supreme being. Likewise, when a snusx or a snɑɔɑq is outwitted by the use of soiled clothing or smoked salmon roe, the means, unnatural to it, are natural to the human being

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employing them. Men and animals alike regard each other's weapons as supernatural.

In consequence of these beliefs, the attitude of the Bella Coola towards animals is fundamentally different from that of white men. They regard them as possessing human ~~m~~immortality, and even the ability to assume human form if they so desire. In fact, they believe that animals merely appear to them in the shape of beasts, ~~but can change to human, or other form and behave accordingly whenever they wish to do so.~~ The degeneration of mankind has made it impossible ~~to~~ for men to see these transformed beings ~~constantly~~ habitually, but even now, or at any rate until a few years ago, shamans were able to lift the intervening veil. From accounts given by those who have had such experiences, it is believed that birds and animals, as well as humans, possess the boon of fire, and it is only the unworthiness of men that makes them unable to see the smoke rising from the houses of different creatures. In days of yore, fortunate hunters were able to do so, and consequently had phenomenal success. The smoke that ascends from the fires of different animals corresponds in colour to that of its owner; a mountain goat's is white, a beaver's, black, a squirrel's, red, a wolf's, gray, and so on. When a goat stamps the earth on a mountain, it rings hollow, as indeed it is to those animals, for their home is within; and when a hunter loses his quarry entirely, it is because the latter has entered its house. Shamans are sometimes able to hear the gatherings of animals under the peaks. Like human beings, they dance to the accompaniment of music, and in all respects behave like them. They have their times of joy and sorrow, of success and failure. When ill they are cured by their own shamans, Grizzly Bear, Sn<u>ı</u>n<u>ı</u>q and Wolverine, ~~these three also dance to welcome the dead.~~ All animals and birds are like brothers, able to converse with each other and living harmoniously together in that other

part of their life which only shamans have seen. Porcupine is the oldest and a hunter always tries to kill one before passing to a more important game. The animals know about the actions of human beings and show their aversion to certain habits by refusing to allow themselves to be seen by anyone practising them. For example, they do not like to have people drink the water in which Dog Salmon have been soaked, and no hunter would dream of partaking of that food. Bella Coola mythology is full of accounts of human beings who, aided by supernatural ability or power, were able to penetrate to the homes of animals.

Fish, too, are regarded in the same light. Indeed, there is a particularly close affinity between men and salmon, for it is through the instrumentality of the latter that twins are born. Just how this occurs, no Bella Coola knows, but a twin and salmon are regarded almost as brothers. Moreover, in days of when men were more powerful than now, a twin was especially liked by animals. Through his connection with salmon, a go'la (1) could understand the speech of birds, animals, and fish. In many instances he even had the power of assuming salmon form at will.

In view of beliefs of this kind it is not surprising that the Bella Coola attribute great powers even to animals well known to them. Danger is always present when a dog acts in an unusual way, though this can be avoided by at once killing the animal. This belief persists to the present day.

In July 1922 a visit was made to an elderly Bella Coola early one morning. The man was in a state of absolute terror. The preceding night he had locked his dog outside of his house to give warning if anyone approached; when he awoke in the morning, it was curled up asleep

(1). The term applied to a twin associated with a salmon.

as usual at the foot of his bed. There was no possible hole through which it could have entered, so it seemed to the owner that his dog must have transformed itself into some minute animal and made its way beneath the door. The only other explanation was that its master, hearing in his sleep the whimpering of his pet, had got out of bed to let ~~hi~~ it in, without remembering that he had done so. To the writer this seemed the probable explanation, especially when the old man admitted that he had been in the habit of walking in his sleep in his younger days, but the Bella Coola was not satisfied. He could not ~~decide~~ make up his mind whether ~~or not~~ to kill the dog, a great favourite, but finally decided not to do so. The incident was mentioned to another informant, who was greatly worried and assumed it to be an omen of death to the dog's master. His only comfort lay in the fact that the animal had not spoken, a sure intimation of insanity and death unless it be killed immediately.

A few years ago a dog gave warning to its master by placing its paws on his shoulders as he sat on the ground, and howling over his head. Such unusual behavior should have convinced him of the necessity for killing the animal to avert some calamity, but he paid no attention to it. A few days later, it seemed to him that he saw the face of a friend appear at an uncurtained upper window where no human could be. The next morning he found an axe, which he had long lost and supposed stolen, imbedded far up in a tree near his house. These three incidents all presaged disaster, and a few days later he shot and killed himself when crazed by drink.

The actions of wild animals are considered even more important. Not many years ago a famous Kimsquit hunter saw a bear and attempted to shoot it. He raised his musket and took careful aim, but was prevented from pulling the trigger. This should have warned him of the potency of the animal, and of ~~the~~ the wisdom of avoiding the ~~same~~ spot in future.

The bear moved away without molesting him, but exactly one year later he was killed by a mountain goat at precisely the same place. No one knows which supernatural being had chosen to assume two forms in that locality.

The Bella Coola believe that animals, being supernatural, have powers and abilities which they conceal from men. Wolves do not kill their prey with their fangs, but with bird arrows which shamans alone can see; beaver do not cut with their teeth, but with crook-handled adzes. Even more striking is the virility of yearling mountain goats. An old Bella Coola described how he and another man were once hunting ~~mountain goats.~~ the animals. His partner killed a fat yearling, which they laid on its back and skinned. The killer was about to dismember it, when the animal began to ~~xxxxx~~ kick. First it shook one hind leg, then the other, then in succession each fore leg, and lastly its head. The goat stood up and gave itself a shake all over, which caused the skin to return to its proper position; then it leapt away apparently uninjured.

Though generally callous with regard to the sufferings of animals, the Bella Coola are usually careful not to kill more than they need; and ~~the~~ knowledge of their supernatural power sometimes leads men to treat them with great consideration. For example, if a bull-head is caught in an olachen net in the river, the fisherman throws it back into the water, saying:

"I have saved you; please do the same for me."

The following incident, believed without question by the Bella Coola, shows the manner in which bull-heads ~~xxxxxxxx~~ help those who have often befriended them. About forty years ago a Kimsquit fisherman ~~xxxx~~ fell into the rapids where he was powerless, and in great danger of drowning. A bull-head, seeing his plight and mindful of former help, increased ~~his~~ its size and shoved the man ashore with its nose.

"I have saved you, mortal," said the fish, as ~~he~~ it did so.

Toads too can aid ~~mortals.~~ human beings. If a man sees a snake devouring one of them he will, if he is wise, kill the snake and say to the toad:

"Please help me when I am in difficulties."

A toad never forgets its obligations and if that man should fall into the river when the toad is near, the latter will grow large enough to drag him out.

Snakes are regarded with aversion and disgust because of their reputed ability to enter the stomachs of human beings. They are thought to be the offspring of a supernatural Mother-of-Snakes, a mythical being of dread powers. The following story illustrates the danger of near approach to this creature:

Kwilais, with several companions, was gathering berries when he stepped into a hole and at once felt numerous tiny creatures crawling over his legs. Looking down, he saw that they were small snakes, and realised that they had just been hatched from a Mother-of-Snakes. Terrified, he fled away pursued by the reptiles which he managed to keep off, to a certain extent, by brushing behind him a branch of the spiny bush mämɨntca, a deterrent with which he had long been acquainted. As soon as he had out-distanced the snakes he called his companions, told them of his adventure and returned home.

There he repeated the tale of his experience. Though Kwilais did not know it, many of the snakes had succeeded in entering his body. Presently he began to swell; larger and larger grew his stomach until he was in imminent danger of bursting. The snakes within were breeding rapidly. Luckily, one of his fellow-villagers knew the proper remedy. A raised bed was made for the sufferer about five feet from the ground where Kwilais stretched himself on a number of thorny branches, while his friends built a fire beneath of Devil's Club and mämɨntca so that he was fumigated in the smoke. Potent medicines were added which final-

ly killed the snakes. The patient began to vomit, emitting a mass of wriggling serpents, and at once he began to grow thinner, soon regaining his normal size. Had he not been able to eject them ~~snakes~~ Kwilais would have died.

Kwilais was not the only one to have this unpleasant experience. Many others have suffered similarly, but in no case has anyone been able to feel the snakes at the actual place or time of entry.

The beliefs of the Bella Coola concerning the power possessed by animals are clearly shown by their attitude with regard to killing them. Man is immortal, so are animals. The supreme being decreed that beasts and birds should serve as food for mankind, but it is only their clothing, their worthless "blanket of flesh," as it is called, which they give to hunters. In the autumn leaves appear to die, but every spring they are reborn. In like manner, when an animal is slain, it merely discards its visible self while its spirit ascends to a land above whence in course of time it comes down to earth again to reanimate a new body. (1) Consequently, the success of a hunter does not indicate his mastery over an animal so much as the latter's good-will in allowing himself to be slain by one who has pleased him by ceremonial cleanness, or by one who has been endowed with skill by some other supernatural being. Men are accordingly careful to obey the wishes of their quarry. Long ago, a mountain goat told a shaman that he and his friends liked soot, so a hunter who has killed one always smears two bands of ashes across its face from the right eye to the left side of the mouth. Another shaman was told by a bear never to use owl-feathered arrows since none of his fellows killed with such could return. Plumes of other birds have since been used, preferably those of Mallard Ducks. Sometimes the wishes of an animal require considerable ritual. For example, when a bear is killed, the carcass is stretched upon neatly arranged evergreen boughs

(1). There are douhters in Bella Coola as in every other community, and the writer has heard several of the older men express disbelief in the immortality of animals.

and skinned. The hunter takes the pelt and reverses it so that the tail lies near the neck, with the whole hanging loosely over the body. He pats it four times, as if pressing the skin back ~~to the body~~ into place, and says:

"Please don't linger. Go home and return," or,

"Please come to me to-morrow. Tell your brothers, your sisters, your uncles, your aunts and your other relations to come to me."

Should this be omitted, the bear is likely to stand up, skinless, shake itself, causing the pelt to return to its place, and run away. Yearling mountain goats are especially prone to ~~xxxx~~ do this, as already mentioned. Even if an animal does not show its resentment by escaping in this way, it often refuses to return to earth unless the proper rites have been performed over its carcass.

Bears have another aversion: they do not like to be eaten by men. So the hunter leaves the skinned body for wolves and eagles whom he invites ~~xxxx~~ to devour ~~xx~~ it. In so doing, he does not address them by their usual names, but calls Wolf, Älkɛn·ixɛxnɛm, "The Devourer of Meat which he does not Kill", that is, "The Biting Scavenger", and Eagle, "Asaikaiyutsmɛxnɛm, "The Constant Eater", that is, "The One who eats before ~~xxx~~ he is Hungry."

Next morning the flesh has been devoured and the hunter believes his guests have eaten it. Animals and birds, being supernatural, can hear not only the words of mortals, but can read their thoughts. The mental attitude underlying ~~xxx~~ these actions is that animals have the power to conceal themselves ~~from mortals~~ so that a hunter must gain their favour before he can hope to succeed.

At the present time belief in the efficacy of such customs as these is rapidly falling into decay and bear meat is ~~xx~~ often eaten. But even now the skull is carefully placed in an evergreen tree near where the animal was slain, so that it may come back to life again.

Fish, like animals, are immortal. In autumn the streams are choked with dead and dying salmon, but the Bella Coola know that they are not really dead, they have merely shed their worthless blankets in accordance with the supreme being's decrees. At that season of the year he causes the rivers to rise so that they will sweep away these useless and outworn cloaks.

Although the salmon, from the kindness of their hearts, allow human beings to feast on them, yet they have certain likes and dislikes which are carefully observed. When the first Spring Salmon appear, women are allowed neither to eat them nor to go near the river; in fact, they must not do so before the rising of the July moon. Men can eat the flesh, but instead of throwing the bones to dogs, they carefully return them to the river, saying:

"Please come back to-morrow."

Salmon, too, like men and animals, live a human-like existence in their homes far beneath the surface of the ocean. They lack earthly objects, many of which they desire, especially pounded cedar-bark to use as sponges for their children. Hence the Bella Coola custom of throwing pieces of this and eagle down on the water for them.

The fore-going customs and tales exemplify the attitude of the Bella Coola towards birds and beasts. They worship no specific animal deities, but regard all of them as belonging to a different plane, slightly higher than that of mortals. Consequently, they must be appeased, propitiated, cajoled or out-witted as circumstances require; above all, they must not be disregarded. The creatures of the forest, whether supernatural or natural, regard mankind with aversion and avoid his society unless he acts in accordance with their wishes.

Beliefs of similar type exist not only among the Indians of North America, but also among most primitive peoples. Indeed, our own ances-

tors had similar conceptions which have come down to us in such stories as that of Little Red Riding Hood. A wolf capable of talking would not seem peculiar to a Bella Coola. When a white man first comes in contact with natives, he usually finds them difficult to understand, and swayed by motives which seem illogical. But let him have the necessary patience to unravel the background of culture, and he finds that actions which seemed strange to him, are consistent with their own beliefs. For anyone desirous of understanding a primitive people, there are few subjects more worthy of attention than their ideas respecting the animals surrounding them, and the equally important ones created by their own imaginations.